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Representing Historic Groups Outside the Mainstream

Hancock Shaker Village

How have historic groups outside the mainstream of American society been represented at historic sites? Given the enormous historic and present diversity of American society, this question takes on considerable importance. The National Park Service, for example, in outlining its Cultural Resources Diversity Initiative, points out that

> The Initiative was established to respond to the changing demographics of the United States. Our nation's increasingly diverse population will influence how the nation sees its past; how it uses the past in the present and future; and, importantly, which historic places are identified, preserved, and interpreted for future generations.[1]

While the apparent diversity is increasing, it is certainly true that American society always has been diverse. How has such diversity been considered in historical narratives and other forms of representation? What relevance can be claimed for non-mainstream historic groups for contemporary visitors to historic sites?

View of Hancock Shaker Village, 1997. Shown here is the Heritage Garden, with the Round Barn in the background. Photo by the author.

A historic restoration site that sheds some light on these questions is the Hancock Shaker Village in Massachusetts. The site preserves and interprets the remains of a historic communal society, a group that clearly was outside the mainstream, however defined. Over the last decade, there have been extensive changes to interpretation and the uses of space at this site. In addition, attempts have been made to make it more relevant to contemporary visitors.

Hancock Shaker Village in western Massachusetts was the third Shaker community to be established (1790) and one of the last to close (1960). It consists of 20 original buildings, a historic working farm, and gardens on 1,200 acres. The Shakers, or United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing, were millenarians. It has been argued that they differed from many other American sects of the time in that their practices rested on a "plan for the gradual redemption of the world aimed at nothing less than transforming the Earth into heaven" and a "driving sense of communitarian purpose, which unites people, land, and buildings in a mission of millennial redemption."[2] The basic tenets of their faith included celibacy, equality of the sexes, communal property, confession of sins, separation from the world, and pacifism. Moreover, they strove for simplicity, purity, and perfection, seeing all work as equally valuable and, above all, as worship.

At its peak in the 1840s, the Hancock community included over 300 people organized into communal groups called Families, each of which contained as many as 100 men and women, Brethren and Sisters, as well as children for whom they were caring and was overseen by Elders and Eldresses. The community worked at agricultural and craft pursuits, while carrying out an extensive trade with the outside world. Known for the quality of their products, the Shakers manufactured and sold seeds, medicinal herbs,

preserves and candies, wooden ware, baskets, brooms, and other items.

Since the mid-1990s, Hancock Shaker Village has been engaged in a broad-ranging program of renewal. Based on an institutional self-study and the recommendations of outside consultants, staff members produced a detailed interpretive plan to identify and define historical themes, research directions, and practical methods of interpretation to guide the museum into the future. Parts of the site have been re-interpreted to incorporate a diachronic approach, replacing the former, almost static, "golden age" representation of time. A new Center for Shaker Studies, which includes gallery space for changing exhibitions, has recently opened.

Over the last decade, efforts have been made at Hancock to distance the interpretation of the Shakers from the "classic" view developed especially by Edward Deming Andrews, first curator at Hancock, in the 1960s. According to Stephen Stein, Andrews was largely responsible for the growth of the contemporary sentimentalized and static image of the Shakers. He tended to treat them as religious isolates. Furthermore, he focused almost exclusively on the Shakers in their "peak years" before the 1860s, reduced the complexity of their religious experience to "primitive Christianity revived," assumed that the highly ascetic regime they adopted in the 1840s had been their standard of behavior at all times, and, in general, "shut his eyes to conflict and dissent among faithful Shakers."[3] In addition, Andrews helped develop the focus on craftsmanship and objects as symbolic of the Shaker urge for perfection that made them seem almost like creatures from another world.

Of particular importance in pointing toward future directions have been the interpretive plan of 1997, and a very ambitious strategic plan adopted in 2000. The latter sets out a vision in which Hancock Shaker Village would "create a new focus on Shaker values and practices as relevant in today's world, including their experiences of community growth, conflict management, commitment to excellence, gender and racial equality, entrepreneurship, environmental management and spiritual and work ethics." This new focus would "impart to the widest audience possible an appreciation of the unique values of simplicity, industry and integrity held by the Shakers."[4] Moreover, the increasingly diachronic approach taken to interpretation will help to show how the Hancock Shakers related to the wider society. This is particularly true for the period from the late 19th century until the closing of the village, during which the Shakers increasingly adopted the "world's" ways and relied on hired labor. The new approaches to interpretation are an attempt to make them appear less strange to visitors while preserving a sense of their distinctiveness.

Hancock Shaker Village is trying to reposition the society it represents. In the past, it tended to be interpreted as a fascinating but marginal group isolated from the rest of American society and, for contemporary people, largely only of antiquarian interest. As Donald Pitzer writes,

> Communal experimenters have often been portrayed simply as colorful "freaks," psychological misfits outside the "mainstream" who inevitably "failed" because they allegedly were out of step with American life and values . . . . Seldom have such groups been considered effectively as an important element in the larger American social and cultural context of which they were a part.[5]

Today, at this historic museum, an attempt is being made explicitly to connect the group's beliefs and practices both with the larger social context of the time and also with the concerns of contemporary Americans. How well this effort will succeed remains to be seen, yet it must be applauded as a step in the right direction.

Notes

1 National Park Service, Cultural Resources Diversity Initiative web page. Retrieved from the World Wide Web on May 10, 2001 <http://www.cr.nps.gov/crdi/description/prgm.htm>.

2 Hayden, Dolores, *Seven American Utopias*, Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT Press, 1976, p. 67.

3 Stein, Stephen J., *The Shaker Experience in America*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992, p. 381.

4 *Hancock Shaker Village Strategic Plan*, June 2000, pp. 9, 1.

5 Pitzer, Donald. "Introduction," in D. Pitzer (ed.), *America's Communal Utopias*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997, p. 5.

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